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Eleanor Lambert: Empress of Seventh Avenue

Eleanor Lambert: Empress of Seventh Avenue is the first exhibition to explore one of the most influential members of the New York fashion industry. Often working behind the scenes in service of her illustrious clientele, Eleanor Lambert was the “original” fashion publicist. Born in Crawfordsville, Indiana, in 1903, Lambert went on to study art and sculpture at the John Herron Arts Institute in Indianapolis and the Art Institute of Chicago. She came to New York City in 1925 and worked as a publicist for artists such as Jackson Pollock, Salvador Dalí, and Cecil Beaton before transitioning into the fashion world. Lambert was an early advocate for black fashion and organized the party. Eleanor Lambert’s eye for talent was impeccable, helping to shape the American fashion industry. Many of her clients received Coty Awards and other accolades for their work. Lambert’s commitment to her clients meant that she defended them when they received backlash for their radical actions or designs. She supported Rudi Gernreich in 1963 when his avant-garde suit design, featuring two different lapels, prompted the established designer Norman Norell to claim that the Coty Award jury was more interested in prizing flashy and rebellious collections than appreciating high fashion design. This incident illustrated the modernizing fashion industry and how Eleanor Lambert skillfully kept up with these changes throughout her career. Although she died on October 7, 2003, Lambert’s legacy lives on through the designers she supported and the work she played in the creation of New York as a global fashion capital.

In the 1940s, helped found the Coty American Fashion Critics’ Awards (1942), and began Press Week (1943) and the Council of Fashion Designers of America (1963). These initiatives celebrated American designers and promoted them to the American public.

Fashion Meets Politics

Lambert also harnessed the power of political influence to promote American designers. In 1963 she testified before the U.S. Senate petitioning for fashion’s recognition as an art form, thereby allowing the Council of Fashion Designers of America to receive financial support from the newly formed National Council for the Arts. Lambert quoted an essay written by Harriet Beecher Stowe to explain the importance of the American fashion industry, stating, “When the American girl adopts an unnatural fashion from foreign circles, she does not represent either her character, her education, or her good point.”

In 1960, when controversy surrounded Jackie Kennedy amid allegations of her buying French fashion, New York garment worker union leaders urged Lambert to intervene. She rebutted Kennedy’s denial, telling the future first lady, “But you are buying French clothes. Women’s Wear Daily will catch you, so don’t lie.” In response, Kennedy hired American designer Oleg Cassini as her “secretary of style.” Although Cassini copied French designs, he brought Kennedy’s fashion under an American name.

Working with U.S. presidents, Lambert also produced fashion shows such as the “March of Dimes Fashion Show” (1944) and the White House “Discover America Fashion Show” (1968) to simultaneously support public programs and promote American designers.

Creative Society

Lambert collaborated with artists, dancers, socialites, actresses, and writers to bring glamour and prestige to the American fashion industry. For example, she brought the International Best-Dressed List to America in 1946, taking it over from the designer Mainbocher, who originally created it in Paris to flatter couture clients. Drawing from her past art world experience, she commissioned Salvador Dalí to design a campaign for the International Silk Association in 1949. Author Truman Capote recruited Eleanor Lambert to help plan the “Party of the Century.” Her infamous Black and White Ball in 1966. She created the guest list, tracked publicity, and organized the party.

Black Fashion Support

During a time when diversity was little supported in the fashion world, Eleanor Lambert collaborated with artists, dancers, socialites, actresses, and writers to bring glamour and prestige to the American fashion industry. For example, she brought the International Best-Dressed List to America in 1946, taking it over from the designer Mainbocher, who originally created it in Paris to flatter couture clients. Drawing from her past art world experience, she commissioned Salvador Dalí to design a campaign for the International Silk Association in 1949. Author Truman Capote recruited Eleanor Lambert to help plan the “Party of the Century.” Her infamous Black and White Ball in 1966. She created the guest list, tracked publicity, and organized the party.

Eleanor Lambert’s Vision of Seventh Avenue

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